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JEWISH GRAMMARIANS OF THE MIDDLE AGES.

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III.

Is it altogether an accident that, as a general thing, we know very little, frequently nothing, about the lives of great men? It cannot be said that this applies only to such as lived in very remote times; for many instances in quite modern periods may be cited,—Shakspeare being perhaps the most prominent,—of eminent men, even such as had gained renown during their life-time, concerning whom we are in profound ignorance. Besides, hero-worship was surely as strong in antiquity as to-day, if not indeed, as there is every reason to suppose, stronger; and people no doubt observed eagerly the doings and noted the sayings of those whom they regarded with awe and reverence, or even looked upon as superior beings. Eminent minds in all probability were in every age surrounded by Boswells and Eckermanns, who watched the object of their worship. “Wie er räuspert und wie er spuckt.” And while they may not have committed their observations to writing on stone, clay, wax, papyrus or parchment, still there was oral tradition; and it is yet a question whether memory, untrustworthy as it is in transmitting *exact* knowledge, is not as capable of ensuring *permanence* to events as the stylus, pencil, quill, or even printing-press. We to this day remember what we are told better and much longer than what we read; and how much more so was this the case at a time when the average memory was so much stronger because so much more needed. A more satisfactory explanation of this rather curious phenomenon that we know so little about those who are best known seems to be that the personalities of great men are overshadowed by their achievements; the man is lost in the hero, the father in the scholar, the neighbor in the writer. But however this may be, the fact remains that, of some of the greatest productions of the human mind, not even the authors are known. Almost all of the Old Testament is anonymous; for the fanciful and crude conjectures of a later age in parceling out the authorship of the various books among certain personages are rejected to-day by most critics as utterly without foundation and incongruous. Of the writer of the Iliad nothing is known, and by many the very personage of Homer is regarded as mythical. Who wrote the Vedas? the Zend-avesta? the Nibelungen? The fact that the question has been asked “Who wrote Shakspeare?” must at all events be taken as an evidence of uncertain and defective knowledge concerning him.

Saadia ben Joseph, or as he is more commonly known, Saadia Gaon, by virtue of his position as head of the Rabbinical Academy at Sura, a man who left an indelible impress upon his age, forms no exception to the rule. We know but very few of the facts of his life. He was born in Fayum; but the exact year of his birth has not been ascertained. The date ordinarily assumed, 942, can scarcely be correct, and it is safer to place it between 870 and 875. More than half of his life he spent in his native place, though it is not known in what capacity. His energetic opposition to Karaism brought him into prominence and secured for him the honor of being chosen head of the school in Sura. This was in the year 928. A controversy with the "Resh Galutha" (Prince of the Exile) the highest dignitary of the Babylonian Jews, cost him his position, and he retired into private life for a period of about five years. He utilized his seclusion by writing the work on which his chief claim to immortal fame rests, the "*Kitab al-Amânât w'al-Itikâdât*," i. e., Book of Faith and Knowledge, or as we might say in modern phraseology, Religion and Science, which, as its title shows, is a treatise of religious philosophy. It is the first attempt, as far as we know, at harmonizing the faith of Judaism with reason. Apart from the intrinsic merits of the work, the fact itself that such a book was written is significant for the period in which Saadia Gaon lived. Necessity, no doubt, called it forth; and its appearance is a signal proof of the mental activity of the times. While upholding Rabbinism in all its essential particulars, Saadia's treatise is characterized by a spirit of free inquiry. He is as violent against those who shun the light of reason from being shed on religion as against those who reject rabbinical tradition. His philosophy is naturally quite crude, his reasoning anything but deep, and at times very shallow, his arguments frequently childish; but no one can fail to be impressed with his broad spirit and his great sincerity. The book is of course written with a purpose,—namely, to crush Karaism; and while it did not accomplish this, there can be no doubt that Saadia was instrumental in checking the progress of Karaism, which at one time threatened to assume large dimensions. The rebellious spirit against the tyrannical sway of Talmudical authority was abroad, and the new movement had a most important result in bringing about a reconstruction of the old party. This was due, in a great measure, to Saadia, who fought his opponents with their own weapons and met them on their own territory. Opposition to Karaism was no doubt a prominent factor also in his numerous grammatical and exegetical works. Unfortunately almost all of the former and most of the latter have become lost; and it is only through numerous quotations in later writers that we learn the nature of their contents. The great fertility of his mind is best seen by the large list of his publications, as follows:—

1. *Kitâb al-lugât* (Book of Speech).
2. *Kitâb al-Daghesh w'al-Rafê* (Book of Daghes and Rafê).
3. A treatise on the Vowel and Massoretic Points.

4. On the Gutturals.
5. *Sefer Sachoth* (Book of Elegance), no doubt of a grammatical character.
6. *Tafsir el-Sabîna lufsât el-farâd*, i. e., Explanation of seventy ἁπλᾶς λεγόμενα in the Old Testament.
7. *Sefer Hâ-Igarôn* (Book of Gathering), probably a collection of difficult words occurring in the Old Testament.

Besides these, there is to be mentioned his famous translation of large parts of the Bible into Arabic, accompanied by copious commentaries. Some scholars are, indeed, of the opinion that Saadia made a complete translation of the Bible. But there is no positive evidence for the fact. It is probable that such was his intention, but that he did not live long enough to carry it out. The parts extant comprise the Pentateuch, Isaiah, Psalms, Proverbs and Job. Owing to the loss of his grammatical works, it is rather difficult to form an accurate picture of his method, and we are left to reconstruct it chiefly from the general traits of his commentaries on the biblical books, and secondly, as already intimated, from quotations in such writers as Menachem ben Saruk, Donash ben Librat, Ibn Ġanach, Ibn Ezra, Rashi and Kamchi. There is one feature which deserves special mention. He did not confine himself, in his explanation of the Bible, to the Hebrew of the Bible, but frequently sought the aid of the language of the Mishna and the Gemara, besides—and not rarely—the Arabic. In his little treatise on the seventy words occurring but once in the Old Testament, this trait is especially noticeable. More than half of these ἁπλᾶς λεγόμενα are brought into connection with some words of the Gemara.

From the high terms in which he is invariably spoken of when quoted, it is clear that he must have stood in high repute even when many of his views and much of his method had become antiquated. A grammarian of the generation following upon Saadia consecrated an entire treatise to a review of Saadia's commentaries and grammatical treatises, in which, while exposing a large number of errors, he nevertheless speaks in terms of the highest respect for his important achievements.

The great defect in Saadia's grammatical method consists in his ignorance of the functions and peculiarities of the so-called vowel-letters, Waw, Yodh, He, when present in stems. Here he is all at sea; and while Donash corrects many of his errors, he, as little as Saadia, is able to bring about a systematic presentation of the subject. It will be shown later on how, by a single stroke, Abu Zakarija Hajjug put an end to the confusion prevailing with regard to the so-called weak stems. Saadia is thus led to make some very childish mistakes. In the passage Exod. II. 5, he takes the word אִמָּתָה as "her elbow," instead of "her maid," confounding אִמָּה with אִמָּתָה. The stem of מִשְׁתָּאָה (Gen. XXIV. 21) he supposes to be שְׁתָּה, and renders, accordingly, "demand a draught." His weakness is also apparent in a neglect of nice distinctions. So

in Num. xxiv. 6, he takes אֱהָלִים as though identical with אֶהְיֶה. Again, מַאֲרוֹת (Isa. xxvii. 11) he derives from אָרֶה, instead of אֹרֶךְ; again, נֶעֱתַם (Isa. ix. 18) from נֹעַ, instead of עֵתֶם. He stumbles over the difficult אֲרֵה (Isa. xxxviii. 15) in regarding it as a derivative from נָדָר. But for all that, Saadia shows himself far superior to his cotemporary, Jehuda Ibn Koreish. He is no longer satisfied with merely guessing and conjecturing, but attempts to frame his investigations within a system. He has already very clear ideas of the distinction between the letters that form the stem and those that merely serve the purposes of modifying the same. The mere titles of his grammatical treatises show that he proceeded systematically, and had already divided the subject of Hebrew grammar into certain divisions.

But even more than his purely grammatical works, did his translation of the Bible, with commentaries, contribute towards arousing a great interest in grammatical studies among the Rabbinites. The next generation already boasts of a large number who devote themselves, almost to the exclusion of the Talmud, to Hebrew grammar; and what is more remarkable still, different *schools* soon make their appearance. With Saadia, the revival of the study of the Bible among the Jews may be said to have fully begun.